



# Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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### *Sargassum Fishery Management Plan Implemented*

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) has published a final rule that implements actions proposed in a Fishery Management Plan for the pelagic *Sargassum* habitat of the South Atlantic Region (FMP). NOAA Fisheries partially approved the FMP in July 2003, and publication of this rule implements those approved actions including the establishment of regulations that restrict the harvest of *Sargassum* in the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council's (SAFMC) area of jurisdiction. These restrictions, in summary, include:

- a prohibition of harvest and possession of *Sargassum* south of 34° N. latitude;
- allowance of an annual harvest of 5,000 pounds of *Sargassum* during November through June from waters 100 nautical miles seaward of the shore off North Carolina;
- a requirement that a NOAA Fisheries approved observer be present on each trip; and
- a requirement that nets used to harvest *Sargassum* be constructed of 4-inch stretch mesh or larger fitted to a frame no larger than 4 feet by 6 feet.

#### **Background Information**

*Sargassum* is an extremely abundant seaweed that occurs near the surface in warm waters of the western North Atlantic. With an exceptionally fast growth rate, floating rafts of *Sargassum* represent a highly renewable natural resource that can be harvested for various uses. *Sargassum* is also a very important habitat for numerous marine species. Recognizing the importance of *Sargassum* as habitat, the SAFMC previously designated *Sargassum* as essential fish habitat (EFH) for snappers, groupers, and coastal migratory pelagic fishes of the South Atlantic region.

Because of its importance as EFH and the SAFMC is concerned about the impacts of commercial harvest on this resource. Over a 22-year period (1976-1997), 203 mt (448,000 pounds) of *Sargassum* have been

harvested off the coast of North Carolina. Management of *Sargassum* as a "fish" is appropriate under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, as this Act includes finfish, invertebrates and plant life within its definition of "fish."

The new fishing regulations are intended to limit the impacts of harvest of *Sargassum* from the North Carolina/Virginia boundary through the east coast of Florida, including the Atlantic side of the Florida Keys. These restrictions will reduce bycatch of fishes and hatchling turtles, conserve and protect the *Sargassum* resource, and limit the impacts of fishing on EFH in accordance with requirements set forth by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.

Other approved actions in the FMP establish benchmarks by which to monitor the status of the *Sargassum* resource in the South Atlantic region. These benchmarks include the identification of the management unit for *Sargassum* and the designation of certain stock status determination criteria for the management unit.

NOAA Fisheries did not approve the SAFMC's proposed designation of what constitutes EFH for *Sargassum*, determining that the proposed designation was too broad, and thus inconsistent with existing EFH regulations. NOAA Fisheries intends to work cooperatively with the SAFMC to develop an appropriate EFH designation, and amend the FMP.

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NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Department of Commerce.